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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Paul Gregory's 1951 production of "Don Juan in Hell," now considered to be a seminal work in the development of professional and educational readers theatre. The paper contends that the production, which presented a nondramatic work without the usual emphasis on design and spectacle, forced a reexamination of the role of the audience, modern theatrical values, and the nature of theatre itself. The evolution of the production is then traced from its conception to its performance by the "First Drama Quartette" (Charles Boyer, Charles Laughton, Agnes Moorehead, and Cedric Hardwicke), generally thought of as the first modern professional readers theatre company. The paper argues that by linking the classical presentational mode of preference with an analogy of classical music performance, Gregory managed to capture the essence of contemporary readers theatre. It then discusses the performance in terms of two parallel metaphors that guided its style of production: the classical simplicity of a Tiffany window display of diamonds and the solemn concentration of classical musicians. (MKM)

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TIFFANY DIAMONDS AND CLASSICAL MUSIC AS INFLUENCES ON THE PERFORMANCE OF DON JUAN IN HELL

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In the fall of 1950, producer Paul Gregory and British actor Charles Laughton toured the Canadian Provinces with their oral interpretation program, An Armful of Books. While driving from New York to Montreal, Laughton asked how they could follow up the successful tour. Gregory responded by describing something he had experienced while walking in New York city. He stopped to gaze at four diamonds on display in the window of Tiffany Jewelers. The diamonds were mounted on miniature bar stools. The stools were painted black and set against a sheet of black velvet. To Gregory the classical simplicity of this arrangement was "excruciatingly beautiful; nothing else was needed to highlight their radiance."[1] Gregory told Laughton that the image of the Tiffany diamonds led him to formulate a framework for a production involving four performers. Gregory recalls Laughton's reaction:

> I told him I'd like to call it "The First Drama Quartette." Laughton spun around and said: "Why you showman sonofabitch, what would you do with it?" I said I didn't know, but I'd like to get four of the biggest stars I could, to so some of the most exciting material that's ever been done.[2]

The framework suggested by the Tiffany diamonds consisted of four actors seated on stools, dressed in formal attire, engaging in a lively, spirited dialogue. The stage would be bare to prevent anything from diminishing the language of the text. This simple, but compelling design evolved into Gregory's historic production of George Bernard Shaw's Don Juan in Hell featuring Charles Laughton, Charles Boyer, AGnes Moorehead, and Sir Cedric Hardwicke.

First performed in 1951 at Clarmont College in Southern California, Gregory's production is today considered a seminal work in the development of professional and educational readers theatre. The "First Drama Quartette" was the first modern professional readers theatre company. According to Keith Brooks, Eugene Bahn, and L. Lamont Oakey: "The impetus for the acceptance of this art form undoubtedly started with Paul Gregory's production of Don Juan in Hell."[3]

The production suggested an alternative to the realistic, representational American theatre of the 1950's. By presenting a "non-dramatic work" without the usual emphasis on design and spectacle, Don Juan in Hell forced a re-examination of the role of the audience, modern theatrical values, and the nature of theatre itself. For academic oral interpretation, the production, with its simplicity of style and emphasis on the text, has served as an exemplar for Readers Theatre.

By tracing the work's evolution from its conception to its performance, we begin to understand the theoretical basis of Gregory's art. Such an understanding gives insights to the aesthetics of contemporary Readers Theatre practice. This paper argues that by linking the classical presentational mode of performance with an analogy of classical music performance, Gregory managed to capture the very essence of contemporary Readers Theatre. The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine how two parallel metaphors guided the style of production: the classical simplicity

of the Tiffany diamonds and the solemn concentration of classical musicisns.

Gregory's decision to mount a professional production of Shaw's seldom performed dream sequence from Act III of Man and Superman was inspired by his experience touring with the immensely popular An Armful of Books. This production was a one-man program in which Charles Laughton interpreted selections from the Bible, Shakespeare, and other great works. Like the Chatauqua circuit performers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Gregory and Laughton toured areas of North America where people seldom had an opportunity to see live drama performed by distinguished actors.

With An Armful of Books Gregory found a vast, neglected audience willing to listen to the finest literature. In Don Juan in Hell, he sought to end "the scabby lie that American audiences have a ten year old mentality."[4] Through his collaboration with Laughton, Gregory transformed literature usually considered unsuitable for theatre into a classical performance mode which captured the very essence of drama.

Critics attempted to establish that Laughton and Gregory were creating a new form of theatre. Both men rejected this notion. They considered their work to be a modern reinterpretation of the classical presentational style with its emphasis on the expression of ideas, the intimate relationship of the performers and their audience, the starkness of the setting so as not to detract from the verbal duel of the rhetorical combatants, and the great

emphasis placed upon the words of the text.

Gregory's first idea for a text to fit this concept was an adaptation of the Preface to Shaw's Back to Methuselah. Laughton was intrigued by the idea, but felt that Shaw's Preface was the wrong vehicle. Instead he suggested the seldom performed dream sequence from Man and Superman. Laughton describes his first experience with this text:

> I first read this piece when I was a student of dramatic art in London in 1927. I had been singled out by Shaw at a rehearsal and had loyally set out to read all his works. The second one I came against was Man and Superman, and this scene. After the first shocks I went around dreaming what a wonderful world it would be in which audiences would come to see this.[5]

Like Laughton, Gregory was excited by the text because of its "duel of ideas and its use of words to make up a sword--to give it an edge."[6] The text exactly fit into his conceived classical performance framework.

The text of Don Juan in Hell was conceived by Gregory as demanding a mode of performance which conveyed Shaw's ideas through language rather than action. To do this Gregory returned to a classical style of performance--simple, static and direct--to communicate Shaw's weighty ideas.

Initially, Laughton was afraid that the fascination of Shaw's words and ideas would not be enough to hold the attention of audiences conditioned to movement and realistic stage effects. As director, he describes his original production concept, based in

part on Shaw's conception of the text:

> ...I got fancy, I wanted to put the four of us on things like tennis scorers sit on and have us dressed in costumes like Shaw described to me in a letter with cloaks tumbling from pedestals in four pools of color, scarlet for the Devil, orange for Don Juan, white for the Statue and mauve for Donna Ana.[7]

Shaw believed that Don Juan in Hell should be presented as a dramatic allegory. He devised the drama in a commedia dell 'arte style with the actors dressed in colorful costumes and surrounded by multi-colored lights. Laughton credits Gregory with convincing him that the quality and impact of Shaw's text would suffer from such a stylized form of presentation.

Recalling the "drama" he perceived of intent musiciams turning the pages of their scores as they palyed, Gregory advocated the simplest form of staging: a bare stage, actors with lecterns and scripts, and dressed in somber evening clothes. For Gregory, in such a performance "every movement of the body, every turning of the page becomes important."[8]

Gregory believes that his performance framework, first suggested by the Tiffany diamond display was "absolutely Grecian."[9] Laughton describes their philosophy of the staging of Don Juan in Hell as "harking back to the Greek stage--the bare faces simulating masks, and the high stools, the cothurni."[10] To capture this ambiance necessitated a static form of staging. Movement was held to a minimum, with most of the dramatic action taking place off stage. The four performers would respond to the "action" of the text by discussing its impact and implications. This style

of presentation paralleled classical Greek theatre in which the audience usually learned of events through the words of a messenger or the chorus.

In his autobiography, Hardwicke compares the bare setting of Don Juan in Hell to the open stage or "platform theatre" of the Greeks. Hardwicke believes that the physical requirements of platform theatre produce a closer relationship between the performer and the audience than occurs in most contemporary productions. He writes:

> The open stage had its origins in the mystical beginnings of the drama, when Dionysus was worshipped by his fellows assembled on the slopes surrounding a mere depression in the earth of ancient Greece. In varying degrees of carpentry, the platform stage endured until the seventeenth century...the performance which the open stage demands of an actor approaches the heart of drama, which consists, as was said long ago, of three boards and a passion...the audience is much more deeply involved in what it is witnessing when it is not divided, as in every Broadway theatre, by footlights from the picture-frame setting, which it can inspect at a distance and with great detachment, like patrons in an art gallery. The stark simplicity of the open stage unites actor and author in what is to me the supreme art, in which the audience must join and not merely eavesdrop. It holds true, in precisely the same way, if the performer is a minister of religion, his script the prayer book of his faith and his audience a congregation making its responses."

In order to accomodate the rhetorical style of Shaw's writing, Gregory sought to cast the "finest voices in America." The importance Gregory placed on vocal ability was an emphasis which stems from classical voice training. According to Oscar Brockett:

> The Greeks seem to have placed considerable emphasis upon the voice, for they judged actors above all by beauty of vocal tone and ability to adapt manner of speaking to mood and character.[12]

Gregory believes that Greek actors were required to stand in front of their audience and recite their lines through megaphones in order to be heard. The Quartette's use of microphones mirrored the classical use of amplification:

> We could have produced it without microphones because all of these actors had been in the theatre. I felt that the words and the ideas needed amplification. I thought if they were bigger, they would be more digestible, more easily played with--something that would come at you and seem more important.[13]

According to actress Agnes Moorehead, "The microphones served as amplifiers--just as in the Greek theatre the masks and hollowed vases threw the voices of the muses out over the vast theatre arenas."[12]

The amplified words spoken directly to the audience gave Shaw's ideas the sense of dignity and importance that Gregory was seeking. This tone of majestic oration grew out of the nature of the philosophical debate itself between Don Juan and the Devil. In tune with the classical format, this debate approximated the set speeches of Greek tragedy. In Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy, Richard Lattimore describes the use of debate as a dramatic device to convey a sense of characters in conflict, defense, attack, and self-examination. Like the debate between the Devil and Don Juan, with the Statue acting as observer/commentator, Greek drama relies heavily upon:

> formal debates between persons where each states his case in a long rhesis or oration with arguments and reasons. The set speeches were often followed by a rapid back-and-forth exchange and punctuated by staid appreciations from the leader of the chorus. 14

Gregory believes that his decision to stage Don Juan in Hell as a modern representation of classical form worked because it was the appropriate form for his material. He rejects the suggestion that his production represented a form of counter-theatrical staging. He states:

> Hell no, it wasn't something new or revolutionary. We never said it was. It was all under the sun. I didn't wake up one day and say I'm going to do something new. I just presented it the best way I knew to do it. The material was the deciding factor. To understand the material and then to say how can I free it so that an audience is able to take the most from it. How do I free the material and the actor so the audience gets the benefit? It should be easy to go to the theatre. That's my concern for the audience--to make them feel comfortable all the time. There has to be a sense of participation between the actors and the audience. 15

This sense of theatricality and significance grew, in part, from the richness of Shaw's words. Gregory maintains that in order to perform Shaw one must first sense the musical quality of the language:

> You have to sense the Shavian language/music or you can never do it. If you can't hear the tune of Shaw then you can't expect to sing it. Shaw has to sing, there has to be that undertext, that undersound, under-instrumentation or it doesn't work. 16

The musical language of Don Juan in Hell can be traced to Shaw's youth. In George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, Archibald Henderson traces Shaw's fascination with the Don Juan legend. Henderson believes that Shaw was familiar not only with the classical treatments of the legend by Tirsode Molina, Moliere, Da Ponte, and Byron, but also with such lesser known versions as those of Dumas, DeMusset, Hoffman and Merimee.[17] Shaw writes: "EVer since I was a boy I have been in search of a satisfactory performance of Don Juan."[18] Shaw's search which led to the writing of Don Juan in Hell, was influenced primarily by two works: Mozart's Don Giovanni and a puppet play version of Don Juan. Shaw writes:

> At the other end of the range /from the street corner Punch and Judy play/ Mozart's Don Giovanni, the world's masterpiece in stage art, is only Punch on a higher plane... Between the two lies all philosophic comedy--high and low, with its Faustuses, its Robert Macaires, its Affable Hawks, its Jeremy Diddlers, its common Joeys with red-hot poker and sausages, its Pierrots...[19]

From its inception, Don Juan in Hell was perceived by Laughton and Gregory as corresponding to a musical orchestration. The influence of Mozart in the writing of the text, the music stands, stools, texts, evening clothes used in performance, and especially the ensemble title "First Drama Quartette", suggested a small group of chamber musicians. Gregory's perception of the drama as musicians turned the pages of their texts during performance, and Laughton's role as director/conductor supported this concept. Agnes Moorehead explained that the music stands were used because of the "symphonic nature of the piece."[20]

Jacques Barzun, in the jacket notes to the original cast recording of Don Juan in Hell, poses the question that troubled many viewers and critics alike--if Don Juan in Hell was not drama, in the traditional sense what then was it? He answers:

> ...it could be argued that it was music. Shaw's play as a whole had its origin in a long-pondered plan to take up the Don Juan theme where Mozart had left it, and the dream of hell, introduced by musical quotations from "Don Giovanni", presents four main characters from the opera... What Shaw does is to compose with words and ideas a quartet in one great moment, or perhaps a fugue for four voices. It would be going beyond the facts to say that the piece was consciously written in musical form, but it is undoubtedly oratorical (which is why it holds an audience so easily)...the result is that in listening to Shaw's verbal sonata you do not, as in reading, mind the returns and repeats, you welcome them...the shape of the vocal rendering gives pleasure--the pleasure of an almost bodily satisfaction--quite apart from the satisfactions of wit, eloquence, and living philosophy. 21

Consistent with Barzun's perception, Gregory views the cast of Don Juan in Hell as representing the mood tones of four distinct instruments. Charles Boyer, the romantic Don Juan figure was the violin. Laughton as the Devil represented the oboe. His tone was that of one who gains immense satisfaction from seeing one succumb to his enticement. Moorehead, the stiff model of propriety, was the harp. Hardwicke, the military commander, was the trumpet or marching drum.[22] Laughton used these metaphors to assist his players in the development of character and in their interpretation of the Shavian language.

Ironically, the only thing cut entirely from the text was the author's direction for violin and clarinet music to set the scene for Donna Ana's entrance into Hell. Gregory adhered to Shaw's dictum

on alterations by having Laughton simply read the stage directions. Gregory believed that Shaw's language, performed by such consummate actors, did not require sound or musical effects to enhance the text. He believed that the text itself would evoke the desired response, i.e., the audience would hear violins and clarinets in their imaginations. To Gregory, Laughton's haunting interpretation of Shaw's prologue immediately established a sense of place and mood.

Gregory's conception of Don Juan in Hell moved towards fulfillment during a ten week rehearsal period which emphasized close textual analysis leading to the evocation of specific images in the minds of the audience. As director, Laughton believed that textual analysis was an ongoing process in which new information and insights were continually broadening the actor's awareness.

According to Gregory, Laughton led his cast through a period of detailed textual analysis in which they studied:

> ...the statement of each sentence, the cross-purpose you had to watch for further down the line--the statement that had arrows pointing with it. So that the thing became electric with the first intention. [23]

This emphasis on thematic statement and restatement was to John Mason Brown an example of how Laughton "conducted the performance as both the intellectual and vocal score that it is." [24]

Laughton's goal was the deepest possible level of understanding, an understanding of each thematic line and interplay of words. His method of analysis and direction was a product of his own instruction at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art under the guidance of Professor Alice Gachet. Gachet demanded that her students answer two questions

concerning any given text: "Who is who?" and "Why is why?" According to GAchet, only by answering these deceptively simple questions could an actor hope to bring an audience to the pinnacle of logical and emotional understanding and involvement. Gregory believed that a text like Don Juan in Hell was transformed into an entirely new experience when master craftsmen placed the proper "who" and "why" in a sentence. GREgory and Laughton exhorted their cast with a slogan they borrowed from Gachet: "You know what you know because you know that you know it and you can't wait to get out and give it to an audience."[25]

Gregory believes that had the actors in Don Juan in Hell not prepared as they did, they could not have created such vivid images in the minds of their audience. According to Gregory:

> If there is anything that is of universal dimension, it is imagination...The success of Don Juan in Hell was due to our ability to create imaginary scenes in the minds of our audience. We gave them an imaginary experience and it was a marvelous thing to behold.[26]

The presentational simplicity of the Greek design combined with the passionate theatricality of Shaw's language embodied in the performers created a profound "music." THis stirring "music" composed of visual images shared between actor and audience was the essence of the production's success.

Gregory's classical and musical metaphors, then, led him to the heart of contemporary readers theatre theory. His style of performance, grounded in both text and technique, grew both from Shaw's writing and Gregory's firm conviction in the potential for the actor to convey great meanings through his voice and body.

Critical reaction to the production emphasized the simplicity and imagination at work in this historic performance.

Brooks Atkinson, drama reviewer for the New York Times, led the chorus of praise for the production: "THis is not only a performance, but an intellectual crusade, and the First Drama Quartette comes to New York bearing ideas, ideals and philosophical passion."[27] John Mason Brown, in Saturday Review, agreed with Atkinson, stating:

> Nothing Broadway has had to offer of recent years has been more absorbing that this theatrically unorthodox presentation of a play which is not a play in the ordinary sense.[28]

The appearance of four professional actors giving the illusion of reading a text was viewed by the critics as not only appropriate, but inspired. Since the text had always looked unactable, the Quartette performed in a casual, almost impromptu style. According to George Jean Nathan, in Theatre Arts: "THe illusion is remarkable, and it all goes to show that no one or nothing can equal the human fancy when it is or even isn't in the least assisted by outside agents."[29]

To Brooks Atkinson, the classical style of Don Juan in Hell worked because it relied upon the imaginations of audience members to supply the mental images complimenting Shaw's words. To this end, the Quartette created an overwhelming illusion, an illusion that is "more stimulating and illuminating than the scenic style of conventional theatre would be. Candor in the use of forms is a great virtue, for it recognizes the nature of the material it is expressing."[30], The ability of the First Drama Quartette to

free the imaginations of their audience led John Mason Brown to the following conclusion:

> Although it has an irresistible informality, it can claim a special dignity. Among its igniting qualities, count the fact that it puts the imagination to stimulating work at the same time that it keeps the mind racing with delight. 31

Don Juan in Hell is an historic production because it was the first modern theatre presentation to demonstrate that essentially "non-dramatic" material could be successfully translated to a performance medium. Its overwhelming critical and popular acceptance was due, in large measure, to the successful merging of classical theatre style and musical orchestration.

By offering a unique alternative to the realistic, representational American theatre of the 1950's, Don Juan in Hell gave impetus to a "new" form of theatre which was in reality a harkening back to the very orgins of drama. The performance of Don Juan in Hell, with its simplicity of style and emphasis upon the text, continues to provide a standard of excellence by which contemporary Interpretation practitioners can draw inspiration and aesthetic insights.

FOOTNOTES

1 Paul Gregory, interview held at his home, Palm Springs, California, May 26, 1979.

2 Gregory interview.

3 Keith Brooks, Eugene Bahn, and L. Lamont Okey, The Communicative Art of Oral Interpretation, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975), p. 388.

4 Gregory interview.

5 Charles Laughton, forward to George Bernard Shaw: Don Juan in Hell, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1951), p. vii.

6 Gregory interview.

7 Charles Laughton, "How Mr. Laughton Became the Devil," New York Times Magazine, (March 23, 1952), p. 92.

8 Gregory interview.

9 Gregory interview.

10 Archibald Henderson, George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century, (New York: Appleton, Century, Crosts, 1956), p. 719.

11 Cedric Hardwicke, A Victorian in Orbit, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 269.

12 Oscar Brockett, History of the Theatre, 2nd ed., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc, 1974), p. 23.

13 Gregory interview.

14 Richard Lattimore, Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 65.

15 Gregory interview.

16 Gregory interview.

17 Louis Corumpton, Shaw the Dramatist, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), p. 92.

18 Stanley Weintraub, "Genesis of a Play," ed. by Norman Rosenbloom in Shaw: Seven Critical Essays, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 25.

19 Henderson, p. 743.

20 Agnes Moorehead, "Staging Don Juan in Hell," Western Speech, (May, 1959), p. 164.

21 Jacques Barzun, Liner notes from the Original Cast Recording on Don Juan in Hell, Columbia Masterworks, OSL-166,

22 Gregory interview.

23 Gregory interview.

24 John Mason Brown, "What, Shaw Again?", Saturday Review, November 10, 1951, p. 22.

25 Gregory interview.

26 Gregory interview.

27 Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, (October 23, 1951), p. 34:4.

28 Brown, p. 23.

29 George Jean Nathan,"Don Juan in Hell," Theatre Arts, (January 1952), p. 80.

30 Brooks Atkinson, "Anatomy of Theatre," (November 4, 1951), p. III:1.

31 Brown, p. 23.